



Valentine's Day Scams Leave Victims Broke and Broken-Hearted

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MADISON – This Valentine's Day weekend, singles looking for love will hit the online dating scene or social media hoping to find a match. But the holiday is special for scammers too. Scammers prey on the most vulnerable victims they can find, and at this time of the year, singles looking for love are a particularly attractive target.

"The average financial loss from these romance scams is \$15,000 to \$20,000," said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. "The criminal takes time to let the relationship develop, and waits to ask for money until the victim believes she is in a real relationship."

Chalmers says the most common targets are women over 40 who are divorced, widowed and/or disabled, but every age group and demographic is at risk.

"Sweetheart scams" take on a number of forms, but most involve scammers starting relationships online under fake profiles, building the trust of the victims and then using a tragic story to convince the victims to send them money or personal information. The payment is often sought as a wire transfer to another country, and each payment is followed by a new request for an even larger amount of money.

If you are looking for love online, be on the lookout for a sweetheart scam when a potential partner:

- asks you to leave the dating site and communicate by personal email or instant messages
- professes love for you in a heartbeat
- requests that you send personal information including Social Security, bank account or credit card numbers
- claims to be from the U.S., but is "traveling" or "working overseas" at the time
- asks you to send money by wire transfer to pay for airfare for a visit, visas, government documents or to help a family member in distress. Never wire money to someone you do not know or have not met in person. Wiring money is like sending cash – once it is gone, you cannot get it back.

Other Valentine's Day "gotchas" include:

- spam emails that appear to come from foreign senders who claim to be looking for love (a variant on the "Nigerian prince" scams)
- local dating services with high fees, questionable services and complex cancellation policies. A Wisconsin resident who joined such a club in a neighboring state claimed that she was being charged an unexpected per-event fee in addition to her base annual fee, and the singles at the social events were vastly older than those she was seeking to meet.

For more information or to file a consumer complaint, visit datcp.wi.gov, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call the Consumer Information Hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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